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DISTRICTS EARN AWARDS FOR REDUCING ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

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(DES MOINES, IOWA) – November 17, 2004 – Six districts were honored by the State Board of Education and Governor Thomas Vilsack today for making significant improvement in existing achievement gaps during the 2003-04 school year.

Cedar Falls, Creston, Davenport, LeMars, Saydel, and South Tama community school districts each received a “Breaking Barriers to Learning and Teaching Award,” which were created by the State Board of Education to recognize successful district efforts to address chronic achievement gaps by improving instruction, curriculum and professional development opportunities for teachers.

Districts earned the award if they improved achievement among African American, Hispanic, or low-income students – the groups in Iowa that experience the most severe achievement gaps – by 20 percent or more, without letting any other group of students decline in their achievement. Six of Iowa’s 370 districts earned the award based on 2003-04 Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) and Iowa Tests of Educational Development (ITED) assessments.

“Reducing achievement gaps has been a State Board priority for several years, and we wanted to acknowledge those districts that have made significant improvements,” said State Board President Gene Vincent. “This is a considerable challenge for districts, because they must focus resources on the students struggling to learn, while still maintaining high levels of achievement for the proficient students.”

Governor Vilsack emphasized the need for more districts to make similar improvements as he presented the awards during the State Board meeting.

“It is encouraging that the staff in these districts have dedicated the time and resources to finding meaningful solutions for their students,” Vilsack said. “We must continue to reach out to all students to ensure they have every opportunity to achieve at their highest possible potential.”

Highlights of the 2004 Breaking Barriers to Learning and Teaching Awards:

Cedar Falls improved reading achievement among low-income 11th graders by 35.5 percent. In addition to all staff contributing to careful analysis of assessment results and brainstorming

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improvement strategies for test-taking, Superintendent Dan Smith said counselors also are meeting with 11th graders prior to taking the ITEDs to discuss student goals and how improving their ITED score would benefit the student, particularly as a practice for taking college prep tests.

Creston improved reading achievement among low-income 4th graders by 20.4 percent. The district has implemented stronger staff development that has focused on reading instruction strategies, particularly with reading comprehension among elementary students. Elementary teachers also have implemented a stronger articulated curriculum with established times to introduce, instruct, assess and maintain reading skills. Superintendent Tim Hood believes the focus on gathering achievement data and continuously monitoring student progress has been key.

Davenport improved reading achievement among Hispanic 8th graders by 20 percent. The district has implemented numerous programs to help students improve their reading ability, including focus lessons, the Reading First program, setting aside time for uninterrupted reading, and professional development for teachers. The district also has strong programs in place in terms of supporting students who are learning the English language, said superintendent Norbert Schuerman.

LeMars improved math achievement among low-income 4th graders by 23 percent. The district benefited from professional development that trained staff to analyze achievement data and diagnose areas of difficulty such as math problem solving. They received additional training support from Western Hills Area Education Agency to learn new teaching methods targeted to specific learning needs. The goal, said Superintendent Todd Wendt, is to have teaching techniques that will build student skills over time, and assure all children are proficient.

Saydel improved math achievement among low-income 8th graders by 21 percent. The district is beginning to see results of a new, integrated, standards-based math curriculum implemented several years ago, said Superintendent Chuck Knight. It focuses on problem solving, which he said works for at-risk students as well as those already proficient. In addition, teachers have received staff development that trains them to differentiate instruction for each group of students, rather than “teach to the middle” and lose students on either end of the achievement spectrum.

South Tama improved math achievement among low-income 11th graders by 23.5 percent. Staff have gained greater awareness and appreciation for assessments as a necessary benchmark, and have helped students understand their importance as well. Resisting the temptation to “teach to the test,” teachers have helped students develop a creative mindset that is test ready, and hosted a picnic to reward students who improved their achievement. Superintendent Larry Molacek said an afterschool program that combines time for homework and tutoring with social activities also has helped students. In addition, Heartland Area Education Agency is providing training to the staff to help them better understand poverty.

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